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Blue Skies Over Raintown

With Deacon Blue's new album set to seal their success Ricky Ross talks to Alan Jackson about faith, fame and families



Personal confessions: Ricky Ross admits to being very ambitious where Deacon Blue is concerned

A harpist plays and waitresses glide silently by with coffee and petit fours as Ricky Ross struggles from the depths of a cream brocade sofa and proffers a handshake. The atmosphere within the lounge of Edinburgh's Balmoral Hotel is soft, rich and over-heated but Ross – at 33 the leader of Scotland's most successful pop band, Deacon Blue – shrugs off the soporific effects. Edgy, alert, bright eyes glistening, he is all attention and smiles, as if genuinely charmed to have his opinions sought out and discussed.

A cynic might surmise that Dundee-born Ross has become an instinctive crowd pleaser whether confronted with a hall full of fans or an audience of one. This, however is not the fake warmth of the media professional: when he speaks, one senses the influence of his upbringing within a Christian brethren family and the years as a teacher and youth worker rather than any smoothness acquired through the promotional round that is part of the performer's lot.

The only son of newly-retired parents – his father rather a small stationary business, his mother was a teacher – he is not one of nature’s rebels. With a winningly self-conscious grin, Ross admits he continued to live at home throughout a degree course in education in his home town. And it took a further three years at the now-defunct St Columba of Iona School in Glasgow’s Maryhill before he succumbed to the rock muse.

He speaks with obvious warmth of his parents, currently in the process of moving to Glasgow to be near him and an older sister. However, while expressing continuing gratitude for the fact that he was never put under any pressure to take over the family business, Ross acknowledges that his decision to give up teaching back in 1985 for the perilous world of pop caused great family consternation. “Parents have no conception of what you’re doing... until you appear on *Wogan*,” he smiles. “Radio One they don’t listen to, *Top of the Pops* they switch off, but suddenly there you are, in all their friends’ living rooms.”

It was while training to be a teacher that Ross made the decision to leave the Christian Brethern, a faith he had readily embraced throughout childhood despite the occasional barriers it created. “Our life was different mainly in that we couldn’t do a lot of things on Sundays,” he notes. “For example, there was no TV. When, on Monday mornings, other kids would talk about which programmes they’d watched the night before, you’d make excuses for why you hadn’t seen any of them. You wouldn’t like to admit to the truth, because it made you feel like outside the normal tradition.”

Such practical disadvantages did not test his basic faith, however. “The least of my problems was, or is, belief. I wouldn’t choose to be a member of that particular church now, but not because I no longer believed. Without wanting to put anyone within that church down – as people they’re phenomenal – I found that I wanted to believe something different and deeper.

“I was very aware that the faith I had grown up with... was answering a certain set of questions for people from a certain sort of background. As I’ve grown older I’ve come to feel that the church here offers a safe and very happy existence to the few who are home-owners and car-owners, but it doesn’t offer any threat to the establishment at all.”

The influence of his faith is implicit within the songs on Deacon Blue’s best-selling albums – *Raintown*, *When The World Knows Your Name* and *Ooh Las Vegas*. *Fellow Hoodlums*, released tomorrow, is expected to enter the British charts at No.1. Although a far remove from rock gospel territory, the songs frequently celebrate the kid of bruised humanity evident in the work of such Glasgow painters as Currie and Howson. “there’s no point writing about places other than those I know,” says Ross of what has been seen by some critics as a fixation with the city. “But at the same time the themes are universal and I’ve tried to make sure there’s nothing to exclude people – after all, we sell records in Brighton too. And I don’t think you should ever exploit Scotland, or wrap it round you like a flag.”

With the six-strong band – his wife, Lorraine McIntosh, features as co-singer – now poised on the brink of its greatest success, Ross finds himself looking for acceptable ways of handling fame and fortune. For, as Deacon Blue’s first stadium dates proved to him, bigger is not always better. “There are some guys we met playing somewhere way back, Huddersfield I think, who became real personal friends,” he explains. “They’d go to every gig, we even went on holiday with them. But when we played Manchester last time – the nearest date to them – they weren’t there. ‘It was G-Mex’ they explained. ‘We just couldn’t go there.’

“That really brought it home to me. I thought: ‘You may have gained 10,000 new people when you played, but you’ve lost the only people who you could count on to tell you the truth about yourself.’ And so much of the new record is personal or confessional anyway that maybe it’s just not appropriate to present it to people in a place where horses jump or goals are scored.”

Yet, perversely, Ross remains racked by ambition. Deacon Blue may limit its next round of live performances to smaller, and hence less lucrative, venues but that does not imply any residual distaste for success.

“I’m very ambitious where Deacon Blue is concerned,” he says, eyes shining in the light of the Balmoral’s chandeliers. “And that involves America. No Scottish band has been really successful there, not even Simple Minds. Maybe we won’t be either. But to go to the land of Elvis and Chuck Berry and James Brown and sell it all back to ‘em... Yes!”

Fellow Hoodlums is released tomorrow by Columbia Records. A single, *Your Swaying Arms*, is also available.